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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIJING 001627

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TAGS: PHUM PGOV CH

SUBJECT: JUNE 4 CONFERENCE ANGERS PARTY, SOME PARTICIPANTS REMOVED FROM BEIJING DURING ANNIVERSARY

REF: A. BEIJING 1494 AND PREVIOUS

- ¶B. 08 BEIJING 2159
- ¶C. 07 BEIJING 3724

Classified By: Acting Political Section Chief  
Mark Lambert. Reasons 1.4 (b)(d)

SUMMARY

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¶1. (C) An underground academic conference on the June 4, 1989 Tiananmen crackdown elicited a swift reaction by Chinese security agencies, according to key organizers of the meeting. Nineteen people, including prominent professors, journalists and activists participated in the May 10 forum, which was held surreptitiously in Beijing's western outskirts. Organizers succeeded in holding the event thanks to strict security, avoiding email or phone messages and relying instead on word of mouth. Though police apparently did not learn about the meeting until afterwards, some attendees have subsequently been subject to harassment and interrogation. Public security officers forced several participants to leave Beijing during the June 4 anniversary. Other scholars who spoke at the forum received warnings from their respective universities. Organizers said their main goal was the break the taboo surrounding June 4 and engage in real academic discussion of the historical event. Though the May 10 forum was the most high profile June 4 related event to take place in the capital, a group advocating for petitioner rights also succeeded in holding a 30-minute candlelight vigil June 3 in a small Beijing park. Online, some bloggers marked the event with indirect references to June 4, though postings about Tiananmen commemorations in Hong Kong were quickly censored.

End Summary.

NINETEEN ACADEMICS ATTEND JUNE 4 FORUM

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¶2. (C) On May 10, 19 academics participated in a conference on the outskirts of Beijing to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the June 4, 1989 Tiananmen crackdown. PolOffs spoke recently with three participants in the meeting: Beijing Film Academy professor Cui Weiping (protect), Tsinghua University historian Qin Hui (protect), and Chinese Academy of Arts scholar Zhang Yaojie (protect). In addition to these three, other participants in the meeting included Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) Philosophy Institute professor Xu Youyu, former Deputy Editor-in-Chief of Guangming Daily Xu Xiao, Peking University Chinese professor Qian Liqun, and human rights lawyer Teng Biao. Also present were several participants in the 1989 protests, including Li Hai, Zhou Duo, and Liang

Xiaoyan. Of the 19 participants 11 have signed the Charter 08 pro-democracy petition.

MEETING ORGANIZED IN STRICT SECRECY

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¶3. (C) Cui Weiping, of the Beijing Film Academy, told PolOff June 12 that she was the primary organizer of the event, and had begun planning for the conference in late 2008. Cui said all participants were invited by word of mouth. The group strictly avoided any discussion of the conference via email and cell phones. Invitees were asked to independently seek out other potential participants without sharing their names. As a result, even Cui did not know who would attend until the start of the meeting. Cui said several scholars declined invitations for fear of official retribution, with a few getting cold feet the morning of the conference. The 19 who attended, however, all agreed to have their names publicized. When Charter 08 was released in December 2008 during preparations for the event, the organizers initially considered shelving the conference, fearing that the political environment had become too sensitive. However, they ultimately decided to go forward with the conference.

¶4. (C) Zhang Yaojie told PolOff June 11 that the conference took place in a guest house in the hills west of Beijing. Cui said there were many "awkward and tense" moments during the conference as

BEIJING 00001627 002 OF 003

participants tried to keep the guest house staff from discovering the true discussion topic. Tsinghua historian Qin Hui told PolOff June 9 that by relying only on face-to-face meetings, the group succeeded in avoiding attention by China's state security apparatus. Qin said he believed authorities had no advanced knowledge of the meeting since, had they known about it, they "would certainly have shut it down."

BREAKING A TABOO

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¶5. (C) Qin, Cui, and Zhang all described the primary goal of the conference as simply to break the taboo against discussion of June 4. Qin described the meeting as the first attempt in mainland China to engage in academic debate about June 4 from a historical perspective. Zhang stressed that the purpose of the meeting was to start a dialogue and not necessarily to push for a reversal of the official verdicts. The organizers, Zhang added, wanted the event to be a legitimate academic conference and therefore included intellectuals and academics who worked "within the system" (tizhi nei) at universities and state research institutions such as The Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. Cui and Zhang said that while participants all agreed that the use of deadly force against unarmed civilians was wrong, the group differed on other aspects of the 1989 democracy movement. Some questioned whether the student leaders were right to provoke a direct confrontation with the Party. According to Zhang, some participants argued that such tactics were self-defeating, noting that hunger striking students should have withdrawn from Tiananmen Square and given the Party some "room" to reach a peaceful outcome. Others, however, said such confrontation was the only effective way of compelling the Party to change.

SOME FORCED TO LEAVE BEIJING ON JUNE 4

¶6. (C) Cui told PolOff that she had been surprised by the speed and severity of the official reaction to the conference. She attributed the swift response to party and government sensitivities over the release of Charter 08 and the May 29 publication of the memoirs of former CCP General Secretary Zhao Ziyang. Cui said that 10 days after the forum she was admonished by her university supervisors, who also warned her not to meet with foreigners around June 4. Cui said that in the days surrounding the anniversary she was under close surveillance with police vehicles parked outside her home. Cui said police also followed her on a weekend outing to Beijing's northern suburbs. Other participants, however, experienced more serious consequences. Cui reported that forum participant and blogger Mo Zhixun, who helped Cui with organizational details, was forcibly escorted out of the city for the day on June 4. Similarly, Zhang said security officials also forced him to leave the capital during the anniversary adding that this was the first time he had ever encountered this type of harassment. Cui said the organizers had originally hoped to make the June 4 forum an annual event but, having witnessed the Party's reaction to the May 10 meeting, she believed a follow-on conference would be impossible.

¶7. (C) In contrast to Cui and Zhang, Qin Hui said he had not been subjected to any serious official harassment. However, soon after the conference, Tsinghua University leaders summoned Qin to answer questions about the event. Qin admitted that he attended the June 4 forum and defended "his right as a historian" to publicly discuss the significance of the 1989 student movement. Qin said that on June 3 he was warned again by Tsinghua administrators not to participate in any other commemorative events. Qin said he was unsure if he would face any additional administrative consequences, but he expected to teach his normal course load in the fall. (Note: In the past, Tsinghua had banned Qin from teaching as punishment for his outspoken criticism of the government and strong pro-democracy views.) Qin said he expected other academics who participated in the May 10 meeting to face disciplinary action from their universities. At the very least, Qin predicted, all would face greater

BEIJING 00001627 003 OF 003

difficulty publishing articles in mainland Chinese publications. Zhang agreed that publication restriction would be the most likely long-term consequence. The Party, Zhang argued, had "gotten smarter" about dealing with dissent and will hand down punishment "piecemeal" and in "quiet" ways.

JUNE 4 "TOO BIG TO BE FORGOTTEN"

¶8. (C) Although he noted that young Chinese, including his own students at Tsinghua, generally had little knowledge of the 1989 Tiananmen crackdown, Qin said there was little risk that June 4 would be forgotten. Qin observed that, like June 4 on the mainland, the 2-28 incident on Taiwan (when anti-government protests in 1947 sparked a deadly crackdown by Kuomintang authorities) was a forbidden topic on the island for many decades yet it failed to fade completely from the public consciousness. Similarly, the 1989 crackdown against student demonstrators was simply "too big" for China to forget, Qin argued.

OTHER JUNE 4 COMMEMORATION

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¶9. (C) In addition to the May 10 conference, other low-key commemorations took place in Beijing. According to activist Liu Anjun (protect), 60 people from a petitioners rights group called the "Mainland National Alliance of Aggrieved Citizens" (Dalu Quanguo Yuanmin Da Lianmeng), held a brief candlelight vigil in a park in Beijing's Fengtai District the evening of June 3. The vigil lasted less than 30 minutes, Liu said, and participants dispersed without incident. As in previous years (see refs B and C), Liu said activists held a virtual rally June 4 using voice-over-Internet software. Liu claimed that over 800 people, approximately 600 in mainland China and 200 abroad, attended this years' online gathering. Liu himself missed these events because public security officers forced him to leave Beijing in the days leading up to June 4, detaining him in a guest house without access to the Internet or a phone.

BLOGGERS DO THEIR BEST TO MARK JUNE 4

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¶10. (C) In addition to the virtual June 4 rally, several mainland-based bloggers managed to get away with oblique references to the Tiananmen crackdown. For example, on June 4 the blogger "Milk Pig" (Nai Zhu Zhu) posted a graphic on his website of a numeric keypad with the numbers six and four removed. Also on the day of the anniversary, artist Ai Weiwei posted a photo of himself standing on Tiananmen Square with an expletive stenciled onto his chest. Well-known blogger Yang Hengjun, meanwhile, published an extensive article on his blog June 3 discussing the 2-28 incident on Taiwan. Although the article makes no mention of Tiananmen or June 4, Yang put sentences such as "Who gave the order to shoot?" and "Exactly how many people were killed?" in bold print, an apparent reference to the Tiananmen crackdown. PolOff was able to access all of these postings June 9 on a computer subject to official Internet filtering. However, overt Tiananmen-related commentary by mainland bloggers on June 4 was quickly removed by censors. Blogger Liu Xiaoyuan initially posted photos of candles, but these were quickly removed by his blog hosting service, sina.com. A first-hand account of the Hong Kong Tiananmen memorial by Guangzhou-based blogger Bei Feng was also inaccessible to mainland-based Internet users.

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